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ABSTRACT

Prepared as part of a series to help college students improve their use of study time and learning materials, this booklet presents a seven-step method for improving reading skills. Each section of the booklet discusses a separate step in the method--(1) evaluating reading habits, (2) providing the right atmosphere for reading, (3) using the eyes efficiently, (4) expanding vocabulary, (5) adapting reading speed to materials, and (6) practicing regularly--and offers exercises to use with each. (FL)

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HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR READING SKILLS

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This booklet is one in a series of AAP STUDENT SERVICE articles developed for the college textbook publishers to help students improve their use of study time and learning materials. Titles of the other booklets can be found on the back cover.

Studying is an essential aspect of education—representing a large investment in time and money. Like driving, athletics or any other activity, it requires practice and concentration. To study well it is important to know how to make maximum use of the books and facilities that are available. The enjoyment of learning and the retention of knowledge depends in great part on developing good study skills and learning habits.

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How to improve your reading skills

by Mimi O'Hagan

Reading is the most important learning skill one can acquire for success and enjoyment throughout life. It is an integral part of our personal and working lives. Consider how much time everyday is spent reading newspapers, letters, books, menus, directions or signs! Eighty-five per cent of college work, for example, involves reading. The better you read, the more you will succeed in study or work and enjoy the time you spend with books.

Reading is basically the understanding of words and the association between them. To improve your reading skills you must increase your ability to see and understand the grouping of words, or ideas, at a speed and in a manner that is comfortable for you. To be a good reader concentrate on what you are doing and learn to use your eyes to the best of your ability. Move them at a rate that allows your brain to absorb the main ideas printed on a page. Bad readers are usually distracted and read each word without grasping the relationship between them. This causes them to retrace or reread the material.

Most people do not perfect their reading after the fifth grade. High school or college students are often bad readers. They overlook the need to continually use and improve good reading habits. Remember your eyes, like fingers for the piano or legs for skiing, must be trained to be skillful.

If you would like to improve your reading skills these seven steps can help:

1. Evaluate your reading habits
2. Provide the right atmosphere
3. Use your eyes efficiently
4. Continue to broaden your vocabulary
5. Adapt your speed so you understand the material
6. Practice on a regular basis

Evaluate your reading habits

Analyze your present reading habits so that you know where to improve your skills:

Do you use your lips, throat or mind to "vocalize" words?	You are probably still using the childhood habit of sounding out each word. This slows you down.
Do strange words constantly stop your progress?	Your vocabulary needs improving.
Do you read every single word?	You should train your eyes to span phrases or "thought units" instead of individual words.

Do you go back over what you have read?	You are not paying attention. Good concentration means good comprehension.
Do you always read at the same speed?	Speed should vary depending on the material and your purpose for reading, e.g., fiction, newspapers, textbooks.
Has your reading speed and comprehension remained static for a number of years?	Skillful reading is an art and needs continual practice. The more you read, the more you will enjoy and remember.

Provide the right atmosphere

Your approach to reading, whether it is for pleasure, information or study, will influence your ability to do it well. Learn to enjoy it in an atmosphere conducive to reading.

Choose an area where you can read with a minimum of interruption. This should include proper light, a pencil for marking highlights in books or taking notes,and a dictionary near at hand.

Location and posture can influence your attitude. Sitting up in a good chair will make you more alert. Reading in bed is usually not the place to concentrate since it is an area associated with relaxation and sleep.

Average readers should hold a book about fifteen inches away from their eyes. It should be held on a slant for optimum viewing.

The sounds of radio, television or music are distracting. You can understand and remember better when your full attention is given to the process of reading.

Use your eyes efficiently

It is the eyes that see printed words and transmit them to the brain. Understand how they work and give them the opportunity to perform well. Eyes perceive words only when they stop moving or make what is called a "fixation." It is during this pause that the brain records what the eyes have seen. Depending upon your "eye span" you will perceive one, two or more words in each fixation. The average college student, for example, has a span of 1.1 words and makes 4 fixations per second.

Vocalizing words impedes reading progress. Poor readers are inclined to whisper, use their lips, enunciate silently in their throat or visualize the words in their minds. If you have any of these bad habits they should be broken because they slow down understanding. Learn to move your eyes continually forward at a pace that allows your brain to understand the meaning of the printed matter.

Train your eyes to increase their span by taking in more than one word at a time. You can make your eyes fix on related words, phrases, or short lines in one brief stop. This sentence, for example, should be read in five fixations: "The cost of oil/has risen/because of/limited national resources/and increased imports."

Don't allow your eyes to go back over words. Think about what you are seeing and keep going at a speed that is fast enough to remember at the end what you read at the beginning. Faster reading, with no retracing, helps comprehension. This does not, of course, mean you cannot review what you have just read.

Many people need glasses to read well. Blurred words, continual eye fatigue or itching and stinging eyes might mean you need glasses. If you think your eyes need correction, have them examined by an eye doctor. If glasses are prescribed, do not hesitate to buy and wear them. Make sure they are always free of dirt and scratches.

Continue to broaden your vocabulary

The person with a good grasp of words is usually a good reader and a good student. Words are the basis of human communication and enable people to convey their thoughts and emotions to each other. This is why the first word uttered by a child generates such joy and pride in the parent. It is proof positive that this little being has the ability to communicate as a human.

Vocabulary should grow as you mature. At every grade level and stage of life, it is necessary to increase the number and understanding of words. Get to know their structure, that they are composed of roots, prefixes and suffixes, each with its own meaning.

Knowing the origin of words helps in understanding new ones. Most English words derive from Latin or Greek. This is why some knowlege of these languages is helpful. If you know the derivation of a word's parts then you will be able to analyze its meaning, e.g. biography, a written account of a person's life, comes from two Greek words: *bios* meaning life and *graphein* meaning write.

Always have a dictionary nearby whether you are reading for pleasure or for work. When you are reading textbooks or technical books, familiarize yourself with the glossary that is sometimes printed in the back to define special words. Use it whenever necessary.

Maintain a list of new words you see or hear. Be on the lookout for ones you don't know. Jot them down, look them up, and then make a point of using them in writing or speaking at least twice as soon as you can. At the end of a month review your list and see if you remember their meanings and how to use them. It can be a private game that is fun and rewarding.

Adapt your speed so you understand the material

A good reader must learn to balance speed with accuracy. Don't expect to read everything at the same rate. Like a well-tuned car, your eyes must adapt to the terrain. Above all, you must understand and remember what you are reading.

Read with a purpose, be aware of what you are reading and why. Your speed should be adjusted to the type of material. Don't expect to whiz through a chapter of biology at the same rate as a chapter of a novel.

Scanning material first can be helpful in nearly all types of reading. Get in the habit of surveying headlines, chapter headings and subheads first. Look for the main ideas. Next you will want to know the important details that support them. Read carefully the first and last paragraphs which should state the most important facts and conclusions. You should read the straight material in between at a faster rate that allows you to understand the matter in as much depth as you want. Just remember to keep your eyes moving forward.

If you are reading for enjoyment you can skim more easily over the lines, paragraphs and pages. It is not important that you take in every word or sentence in depth. As in most writing, each paragraph usually has one main idea supported by details in which you may or may not be interested. Try to span as many words as possible with a continuous rhythm of eye movements or fixations.

When you read a newspaper or magazine, or non-fiction, you want to grasp the highlights and some details. This kind of reading is for general information. It differs from your leisure reading because the material is more serious, not as light or as easy to comprehend as fiction. But it still might not be necessary to take in every word or every sentence completely.

When reading a text first survey the entire book. Look over the table of contents, chapter headlines and subheads. Get an overview of the author's objectives by reading the introduction and preface.

Studying requires close reading because you will need to remember more details to support the main ideas. Read each chapter for the important concepts and as many details as necessary to comprehend the material. Underline major points and make margin notes to highlight your observations. After you have finished reading, question yourself, review the summary if there is one, and then look back to see if you have understood the material.

Graphic material can help reading comprehension. Do not overlook the importance of tables, maps, graphs, drawings and photographs which are included to reinforce your understanding of the text.

Practice on a regular basis

Like any skill, reading requires practice. In order to develop the habit of good reading you must train your eyes and mind to perform well together. The rewards will be most worthwhile if you take the time and persevere. You don't have to take a speedreading course.

Set aside 15 to 30 minutes every day to practice reading, much as a pianist, typist or golfer would. Start off your exercises with light material, such as *Reader's Digest*, that has uniform page length and short articles. Your objective is to read with understanding at your best speed.

There are established norms against which you may test yourself. The speeds generally accepted for average readers are: easy or light material, 250-350 words per minute (wpm); medium to difficult material, 200-250 wpm; and difficult material, 100-150 wpm.

Time yourself exactly for two pages with a clock that has a second hand. Calculate the minutes and seconds and divide the time into the number of words on the page. This will tell you what your current reading speed is in words per minute. You can get the average number of words on a page by taking the average per line and multiplying it by the number of lines, omitting headings. Using the opposite page as an example: the average number of words per line is 11, with 40 lines of type, totalling 440 words on the page. If you read it in 1 minute and 45 seconds (105 seconds), you read 4 words a second, or 240 words per minute.

Ask yourself questions on the material and review it to see if you are correct. If you miss important details your speed is probably too fast for your present reading ability. Don't get discouraged, just keep practicing.

Read 3 or 4 articles each day for two or three weeks. Use the same length and type of material each day. Push yourself but use discretion, making sure you check your comprehension of the material. Record your speed faithfully each time so you can check your progress.

Then switch to something more difficult in vocabulary, style and content. Do this for two more weeks, questioning yourself and recording your time. After a total of six weeks you should have increased your reading ability considerably.

Try to get your speed on easy material to about 300 words per minute. Once you have reached this level you will know you can do as well as the average good reader.

Maintain the habit by reading at least a half hour a day. You will be informed by keeping up with newspapers, magazines and books. You will also enjoy reading more as your proficiency increases.

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